

Sigríds Saga

Sigríds Saga is a respectful pastiche by Christopher Brown-Syed, with much borrowing from Snorri Sturluson and a little from Lady Gregory and William Morris. A Revised Web edition with a new Afterword by [the author](#), was posted in 2003. This PDF version was posted in November, 2004.

Incipit Liber



here was a man called Harald, who lived in Haraldsness in Norway. He had spent some time as a trader in the south, and had made several voyages to Ireland and the Orkneys. He had a son called Leif, who was also an adventurer. Leif had a fine trading ship. He was a distant relative of Leif Eiriksson, who rescued the shipwrecked sailors and was called "The Lucky" after that. This other Leif discovered Vinland, as is related in *Eiríks Saga Rautha*.

One day, when summer came, and Leif's ship was being fitted out for a voyage, he went to his father and said, "I have been sailing about for five years now, and I think I would like to try my hand at farming." Harald was not surprised, and offered him the land that lies between Haraldsness and Bjarnarfjord. But Leif said that he wanted to go to Iceland, if that pleased his wife and his men. Sigrid was his wife's name, and they had a son and two daughters. That morning, Leif went down to where the ship was lying in the sound and told his men what he was planning. "So", he said, "I have determined to go to Iceland, if you will go with me." All the men said that they would go, "for your luck has brought us all much success".

Next morning, Leif said farewell to his parents, and brought his family aboard the ship. Then they rowed out of the sound and raised the sail. Soon, a good wind came up and drove them all the way to Iceland. They sailed for a few days without seeing any land. One morning, Leif was standing at the prow of his ship when he saw a flat land to starboard. "Now, I can see a very green land ahead", he called to his crew, "And it seems to me to be Iceland."

Now Leif's wife came and looked at the land. "Let us sail along the coast until we find a sheltered harbour." Sigrid said. "I have always wanted a comfortable house in the woods, where there are hills to keep the winds away in winter." Sigrid went on, "It seems to me that there should be many sheltered fjords here in Iceland".

So they sailed further along the coast until they came to a green, hilly, wooded land, and saw a fine harbour off the starboard beam. There, Leif cast his high-seat posts into the sea, and they washed ashore at the place called "Leif's Seat Posts" to this day. Leif built a house there, and he dwelt at Leifsholm for many years with great honour. Leif composed this stanza:

My sea-stallion stands at his hitching post.
When will the wind-lord lead him hence?
Now I will plough fresh furrows.

Now Sigrid was his wife called, as I have already mentioned, and they had a son called Snorri who became a farmer. He does not figure in this saga, but his son, Snorri Snorrason, was a sea-farer who served King Harald Fairhair when he attempted to conquer England. Leif and Sigrid had two daughters as well. One was also called Sigrid and the other Thorgerð. They were both very good-looking girls. They took more after their mother than their father.

Leif's farming went very well. Each spring, Sigrid and her daughters were most anxious to attend the Allthing at Thingvellir, to talk with their neighbours and to obtain new ornaments or clothes. One particular year, Leif said that he would go, "Because I want to obtain some cattle and hear the news from Norway." Everyone was talking about the feud between Olaf the Lawspeaker and Thorbjorn the priest. There was a rumour that this Olaf would bring suit against Thorbjorn for running off some sheep of his.

Bjarni Comes to Iceland

Now there was a man called Bjarni, who was a famous viking and soldier of King Olaf Tryggvasson in Norway. Bjarni had distinguished himself in King Olaf's service, and the king had given him great honour. He was always called "Earl Bjarni" because of this. He was very fierce in battle, and some said that he was a berserker. This Bjarni had wandered about the world for a long time, but had never been to Iceland.

That same summer, Bjarni came sailing in his ship to Iceland, and landed at Reykjavik. He wanted very much to attend the Allthing, because he had formed a plan to settle down in Iceland and raise a family, and he wanted to know which parts of the country were most suitable for farming.

Bjarni attended the Allthing with his whole household. He set up booths in Thingvellir, and began to trade and gossip with the Icelanders. Everyone remarked

about Bjarni's excellent stories and about the quality of his goods. Bjarni had brought a quantity of beer. As well, Bjarni took bets on the outcome of the lawsuit between Thorbjorn, Thor's Priest and Olaf the Lawspeaker. All was going well until Sigrid and Thorgerð came walking by. Bjarni was struck by their good looks and made enquiries about their identities. That day, he could think of nothing else, so he determined to call upon Leif the next morning and ask for one of them in marriage.

Next day, Bjarni got up and put on a green cloak that he was fond of. He tied a great steel sword with a fine jeweled hilt about his waist. Bjarni got that sword from King Olaf when he was in the king's service in Norway. That same sword had belonged to Olaf Tryggvasson's father. Bjarni also put on a gold brooch, and a pair of red trousers, such as the Norwegians wear. He looked very much like a man of substance.

Bjarni came walking to the place where Leif had set up his tents. He and his wife were outside making breakfast, and Sigrid said, "Who is that lucky-looking man in the green cloak?" "That is Bjarni Bjarnasson, the viking," Leif replied. Sigrid got up and went over to Bjarni and asked if he would join them. "That suits me well," Bjarni replied. He had a great appetite, and soon all the breakfast was gone.

"You have two daughters," Bjarni said then, "And I was wondering if you would like to give me one of them for a wife." Just then, Sigrid and Thorgerð came back. Bjarni thought that they were even better looking than yesterday. When Leif asked him which daughter he would prefer as his wife, he couldn't make any decision, and said he would have to find a rune-wife to cast runes and help him decide. Many people in Iceland were heathens at that time. There was a woman at the Allthing called Thora who was skilled at reading omens. Leif said that Bjarni should see this Thora and come back the next afternoon.

That same day, Bjarni went to where the rune-wife had her booth set up. She was an older woman, but good-looking, and she wore tattered clothes. Thora gave Bjarni a strong drink, and set some herbs and branches on the fire to burn. Then she took some short sticks out of a bag and scattered them on the ground. These sticks fell into a pattern called "tree runes" or "secret runes". Thora sat looking at the runes for some time.

Finally, she said to Bjarni, "The marriage you propose will go very well, but you will not remain long in Iceland." Bjarni was anxious to know which daughter he ought to choose. "Ask for the one with the red hair", Thora told him. Bjarni gave the woman a fine shirt he had brought with him from Norway, and went back to his tent. Thora wore that shirt at the Allthing, and everyone said it made her look

very pretty.

That night, Bjarni racked his brain trying to remember the red-haired daughter's name. He had forgotten which was Sigrid and which Thorgerð. Next morning, he dressed up in even finer clothes than before. Under his fine green cloak, he wore a yellow shirt that suited the colour of his hair. He wore a rich pair of blue trousers that day, and on his fingers, some of the rings King Olaf had given him. Bjarni composed this stanza on the way to Leif's booth:

I walk this way to wed a red-haired maid.
The witch-woman read one-eyed Odin's will in this.
But which woman will walk away with me today?

Sigrid and Leif were cooking breakfast as usual, and they asked Bjarni to join them. All during the meal, Bjarni kept looking about for the daughters. For their part, they were in their tent, observing the stranger. "He seems to me to be a rather handsome fellow." Thorgerð said. "But I hope, for my part, to make another match". Sigrid said nothing. She had seen Bjarni on the previous day and she had contrived to walk by his booth on purpose. Sigrid had already made up her mind to marry Bjarni.

A while later, both daughters came out of the tent. Bjarni was delighted, and stood up to look at them. But when he came to choose, he found it impossible to distinguish these women by their hair, for the colours were almost identical. Both seemed blonde, and not red headed. Bjarni couldn't understand Thora's advice, and became quite confused. Again, he had to tell Leif that he would return the next day.

Now it happened that Olaf the Lawspeaker paid Leif a visit that afternoon. He hoped to convince Leif to support him in his suit: "Thorbjorn is your neighbour too, and next year, he may run off those new cows of yours if we do not put a stop to his stealing right now." Leif said that he would stand with Olaf at the Law Rock, and suggested they ask Bjarni to be another oath-helper. "That doesn't please me," Olaf replied, "for I have heard how Bjarni is taking bets on the outcome." Leif agreed that nobody would believe Bjarni under these circumstances. "Nevertheless, he seems an honest man, and soon, he may be my son-in-law."

Leif put on his best clothes and together, he and Olaf went to visit some men they knew. By late that afternoon, they had more than enough witnesses, so they went right up to the Law Rock and Olaf announced his suit. "And I defy Thorbjorn, Thor's Priest, to defend himself with half as many oath-helpers!" Olaf shouted.

Thorbjorn was furious, but his case was very weak. Everyone knew how greedy he was, and the Allthing soon decided in favour of Olaf. Thorbjorn was ordered to pay heavy compensation for the stolen sheep.

Thorbjorn had a wife whose name was Freydis. She had been sitting there listening to the proceedings, and she did not look very happy. Suddenly, Freydis sprang up and addressed the crowd. "Thorbjorn will pay an even heavier price for his ill-doings", she said, "For I declare right now that I am suing him for a divorce, and I want half of his possessions!" By the time Freydis finished speaking, nobody thought much of Thorbjorn's character. The case was decided quickly in her favour. Naturally, Thorbjorn was in a rage. He stormed off to his tent and gathered up his war gear. Later, he was seen riding in the direction of Thorbjarnardale with about ten or twelve men. Everyone remarked that no good would come of this, and that Olaf would likely have to attack Thorbjorn in order to get his compensation.

The Allthing was ending, and many people stayed up late that night, sitting around a fire. They listened to poets reciting sagas such as this one, and drank a great deal of mead and beer. Bjarni was there, paying off his betting customers, but he didn't seem too displeased. He had won a considerable amount himself. This Bjarni was not entirely an upstanding man. Sigrid and her daughters were sitting among the crowd.

At that point a breeze blew up, and the moon clouded over. Thunder was heard, and a flash of lightning appeared in the sky. People began to gather up their things and to run for the tents. Many made the sign of the hammer, because they suspected that Thor might avenge the dishonour done to his priest.

Bjarni stood beneath an ash tree. One of Leif's daughters was still standing by the fire when Thor's wagon rolled through the heavens again, and a blow from the god's hammer struck the tree near where Bjarni stood. Everyone's faces glowed brightly in the lightning flash, except the woman by the fire. Her fair face and golden hair appeared to be red from the flames. All at once, Bjarni understood Odin's oracle. He rushed to where the woman stood. Of course, it was Sigrid.

Next day, Leif called all his friends together, and Olaf the Lawspeaker married Bjarni and Sigrid there at Thingvellir. The wedding went very well, but it cost Leif dearly to feed all the people. A few days later, the Allthing ended, and people rode off home. Bjarni went with his new in-laws, while his men sailed the ship round to Leifsholm.

Some time later, Bjarni and Leif were walking in the woods, discussing the future.

"It would please me very much if you and Sigrid would farm the land upriver," Leif was saying. "That would suit me well," Bjarni replied, "But I feel I may have to leave Iceland soon." He told Leif the rest of Thora's prophesy.

When they got back to the house, a great many men were waiting there, clad in war gear. Olaf the Lawspeaker was their leader. He had decided to pursue Thorbjorn to get his compensation, and to force the priest to reach a settlement with Freydis. Partly, this was because Olaf was a most distinguished man, and considered it his duty to help Freydis. Nevertheless, he seemed by no means displeased at the thought of fighting with Thorbjorn. Leif and Bjarni got their weapons and soon everyone rode off toward Thorbjarnardale.


They rode right into the farmyard and Olaf called out to Thorbjorn to give up the promised settlement, or else to fight. "One way or another," Olaf added, "You will settle your account with me and with your wife today." When Thorbjorn finally came out of the house, he was clad in his war gear and was holding a battle axe. It was plain he had no intention of talking. Thorbjorn and his companions attacked Olaf.

Then the priest's men fell back. Olaf pursued Thorbjorn into a wood behind the house. Thorbjorn blocked many of Olaf's sword-strokes with the shaft of his axe. At last, Olaf's blade cleft the axe in two.

Thorbjorn said: "It now appears that I should have slain you at the Allthing when my men were all about me." But Olaf said, "As luck would have it, you did not. And so, it seems, I must now kill you." He slew the priest then. The victors divided up Thorbjorn's land and possessions among them. Then, they made a big mound and buried Thorbjorn and the men who had died with him.

There was peace in the region for some time after that. Bjarni and Sigrid soon had two promising children, a boy and a girl. Their names are unimportant, since they never did anything special.

Svein Invades Ireland

Bjarni had a southerner in his service. This man was a Saxon who had been  captured during a viking raid. His name was Aelfric, and he was Christian. This Aelfric was an educated man. He could sing and write as well as being good with his hands. When the children were growing up, Aelfric taught them. Sigrid became very fond of him. Often Bjarni's household would sit up nights listening to his tales.

Aelfric had been about fourteen when he was captured, and when he turned

twenty-one, Bjarni released him from all obligations and gave him land of his own in Thorbjarnardale. This was some of the land which had been given to Bjarni by Olaf the Lawspeaker for his help in defeating Thorbjorn.

Aelfric farmed that land for two years before he went to Bjarni with a proposal: "I would like to take that ship of yours and sail to Orkney, or perhaps to England." Aelfric went on, "I never told you, but my father was an important man in England, and I would like to see if he is still alive." He used the Saxon word '*ealdormann*'. Bjarni agreed at once. He knew that some of the men wanted to resume their sea-faring by this time. He gave his former servant a fine set of war gear, and provided him with a crew and provisions. "But make sure you come back again by winter, or at the latest, by Yule time," Bjarni counseled him. "For I have heard how unpleasant it can be to spend the winter in England."

Bjarni and Sigrid stood watching as Aelfric rowed the ship out of the harbour. "I wonder if we shall see our friend again?", Sigrid said. "I have no doubt that he shall have adventures," she went on. "And perhaps I shall sail off after him one day," said Bjarni.

Now at this time in Ireland, on one of the small islands off its western coast, there lived a man called Kieran. He had one very good-looking daughter. This woman was called Brigit, after a famous Christian woman from Ireland. Brigit was about nineteen years old, but she had never married. Many young men had wooed the woman, but none of them had met with much success.

Although she was a pleasant enough woman, this Brigit preferred wandering along the cliffs or tending sheep, to the company of men. Sometimes, she would be seen running along the strand with the spray flying all about and her hair blowing to and fro. Now and then, Brigit would disappear for some time, but her father never seemed anxious on these occasions. "Brigit is with the other people", Kieran would say. Stories spread about how Brigit would hold conversations with the former inhabitants of Ireland, and even follow them into their mounds under the earth. This Kieran's people were descendent's of the *Ui Neil*, who had defeated the *Tuatha de Danann* in the old days when a mist covered Ireland. Finally, the young men avoided her, because they thought she could cast spells.

One day, as Brigit was walking alone on the beach, a ship appeared sailing round the headland. Then a small boat could be seen, rowing from the ship to the land. Instead of running away, Brigit stood there looking at the boat until it reached the shore. Then six or seven men in war gear sprang out and ran after her. Their leader was a man called Svein. He was a famous viking and adventurer, who lived in Orkney. This Svein was not well liked. Everyone remarked that he spent too much

time going on raiding expeditions rather than looking after his farm and family. He was a worthless fellow.

Despite his bad reputation, Svein made no attempt to harm Brigit. This woman had raven black hair and bright blue eyes. She was wearing a short purple and grey cloak and a grey and green skirt. Brigit had woven those clothes herself and dyed them with dyes made out of herbs and sea creatures from Ireland. Her complexion was always wheat-coloured, because she spent most of the time tending sheep. The woman was standing in the surf with her hair tangled from the wind. She had a very wild appearance.

The pirate leader questioned Brigit about the land and its inhabitants. This did little good because the woman spoke no Norse. Then Svein said, "Since there seems to be no other booty nearby, let us take this woman with us to Orkney."

Brigit went into the rowboat calmly. As the boat was putting out, she sat looking back at the cliffs. Then she began to sing in a foreign language. Many of the vikings made the sign of the hammer after that. All the way home, the crew grumbled over Svein's decision, and said that no good would come of it. Some claimed that it had been an unlucky day when Svein found Brigit on the beach. Nevertheless, they caught a good wind, and soon arrived in the Orkneys.

After a year, Brigit had learned the Norse language well. For his part, though he had been a notorious viking and pirate to this point, Svein now seemed much happier farming. He began to look after his household well. When he found that the woman was skilled at weaving, Svein gave her wool and dyes. She began to make fine clothing for Svein and his family.

This Svein had a wife whose name was Unn. She was a very strong-willed woman. Some people said that it was to satisfy Unn that Svein went on viking expeditions. She was not pleased that her husband had brought home such a skillful serving woman from Ireland. Unn was always belittling Brigit whenever she got the chance. When she was not busy with her tasks, Brigit would take the children out into the fields and tell them stories about Mannan Mac Leir, Cuchulain, and other famous men of the south. This Brigit was a Christian, as I have already mentioned.

One day, Unn found her housemaid working on a fine purple shirt. "That shirt seems too big for me," Unn remarked. "That is because I am making it for your husband," the woman replied. Unn was furious and stormed out of the house. She took some belongings and rode to her sister's farm which was some distance away. A while later, Svein returned and asked where Unn was. "She has ridden off," Brigit told him, "And it seems to me that she will not be coming back soon." She

told Svein how angry Unn had been. At this point, Svein realized that he would have to get rid of the woman, and began to think of ways of doing this. For the time being, he sent her away to the summer pasture. In those days, a serving woman was worth two milch cows.

That same summer, Aelfric came sailing in Bjarni's ship and landed in the Orkneys. He was hoping to refit his ship there before sailing on to England. Aelfric had lived among the Icelanders since a very young age, and he was anxious to learn about the lands to the south. Before long, Aelfric heard about a beautiful shepherd woman who lived in a hut upon the downs. "Only everyone avoids her because she is a sorceress from Ireland." Aelfric was even more curious when he heard this, and he determined to visit the woman.

Next day, Aelfric set off in the direction of the summer pastures. Soon he could see sheep in the fields, and a little hut against the hillside. When he was still some distance away, Aelfric stood still and listened. He brushed the hair away from his ears, and turned his head this way and that. Somewhere nearby, he could hear a woman's voice singing.

Aelfric thought that he had never heard the language before, though he knew several languages from his childhood in England. This song was not in Latin, nor in the language of the Celts, nor that of the Britons. It was certainly not a Saxon song. Aelfric thought that language was suited to music. He was certain the singer was Brigit. Nevertheless he could not see anyone. The song seemed to be coming out of the hills. Aelfric stood listening until he could remember a tune. Then he composed this stanza in Latin:

What a wondrous thing is this?
I marvel as I sing,
To hear a hidden woman's song
Upon the hills in spring.

At this point the singing stopped, and Aelfric heard a woman's laugh. Brigit had been sitting behind a rock, and she rose up and walked toward Aelfric. The woman addressed him in the same language. "It has been some time now since I have heard Latin spoken, much less sung."

Aelfric felt at once that looking for Brigit had been a lucky thing to do. Brigit had on the old purple and grey cloak and the green and grey skirt which she had been wearing the day she was captured by the vikings. Aelfric was pleased with her appearance, although her hair was tossed around by the wind. These two stood

looking at each other for some time. "As for me," he said, "I have lived my whole life without hearing that language of yours." Aelfric continued, "And I wonder very much what it might be?"

"That is no surprise," Brigit answered, "Since there is nobody left in Midgard to speak it." Aelfric laughed. "Then I suppose that you have come from Asgard." He went on, "Because I have seen no woman like you in this middle earth, and I doubt that you have come from Niflheim!" "Be on your guard," she told him, "Because I may know more about the abode of Hel than you."

They sat there on a rock, talking like this for some time. It was plain they had taken a liking to each other. Then, since it was getting late, Brigit led Aelfric to her hut and prepared cheese and butter for him. Then she poured out a drink like mead. They sat talking and eating until the sun had gone down behind the hills and the Bear was wheeling over head. In the west, shone the silver star which the Saxons call Earendel.

Aelfric said that he would go down the next day and offer Svein a ransom for Brigit. "Then we will sail together for England," Aelfric told her, "Unless there is some other county you would prefer to visit." "That suits me very well," Brigit replied, "But I hope we will visit my home in the west of Ireland," she went on, "Because it has been some time since I saw my family." Aelfric agreed at once, "But on condition that you teach me that language of yours, for it is the most pleasant language for singing that I have heard." "I will do that," Brigit said, "Only first we should go to Ireland."

The next day, Svein was standing outside the house when he saw Brigit come walking over the hill with a stranger. He could see how friendly they were even at a distance, and this surprised him. He had heard how the Culdees of Ireland avoided marriage.

Unn stood listening in the doorway as Aelfric made his proposal. "And I will pay you twice the customary price," he concluded, "Or if that is not enough, then I challenge you right now to a fight, and you may receive a better price tonight in Niflheim." Svein was not pleased at this. "I would kill you right now, only as luck would have it, my sword is inside the house." "In that case," Aelfric said, "It seems that I ought to kill you instead." He drew an axe from his belt and swung it at the viking. Svein was wounded slightly on the shoulder. When she saw the fighting, Unn ran into the house and came out with Svein's sword. But Brigit had already put a stop to the bickering. "Because I do not wish to see either of you hurt or killed." Svein's anger cooled at this point, and he agreed to take the money.

Unn bandaged up her husband's arm. She was not at all displeased to see the girl depart. Unn was already planning how she would spend the ransom money. She was a very small-minded woman, and despite all his viking exploits, Svein was an inconsequential man. They play no part in the rest of this saga.

Soon Aelfric's ship had been provisioned, and they rowed out of the harbour. Brigit stood in the prow with the spray blowing all over her. Then Aelfric ordered the sail hoisted, and it filled at once with a good wind. They sailed for four days without seeing any land. On the fifth day, a grey mist swirled over the sea. Then a beautiful rocky land rose off the port bow. Brigit sprang to the prow, and recited a verse written by a famous countryman of hers:

Surely, this is my own land. Ireland of the Saints.

Aelfric called Brigit to the stern, and asked her to set the course. The crew could see how proud he was of his new wife. Some of them disliked this foreign woman. However, everyone respected Aelfric, and said, so far, he seemed to be a lucky man.

With Brigit guiding them, the vikings steered along the western coast of the land. Soon they came to an island surrounded by high cliffs, where the sea roared against a shallow beach. There was no harbour here. Then they saw two men in a small hide-covered boat. The men rowed away furiously when the viking ship appeared. They steered their small craft directly into the surf, and beached it on a narrow shingle. By the time the vikings were along side, the men had disappeared over the rock walls. It was clear that they had been visited by vikings before. It was for good reason that the inhabitants of England and Ireland used this prayer:

From the terror of the Northmen, O Lord, deliver us!

The fishermen did not know that it was not a hostile ship. Aelfric soon launched a small rowing boat while the viking ship hove to. "Sail backward and forward for a day or two," Aelfric told the men, "And if I have not returned, then make your way home to Iceland." Many of the crew argued that they should land in force and put the inhabitants to the sword. "If I do not come back with booty," Aelfric replied, "Then do as you will." He took Brigit and six men with him into the boat.

The vikings came ashore beside the foreigners' rowing boat. They followed Brigit up a steep path on the cliff-side. At the top, the woman listened for any sound of trouble. Satisfied, she led the men over the ridge and down the sloping rocky land toward a small village. Taking Aelfric, she told the men to follow at a little

distance. Brigit was afraid that her own people would attack the invaders and slay them before they recognized her. Then Aelfric and Brigit walked to the village. There was no sign of people.

Then Brigit called out in a clear voice: "Kieran! Kieran O'Neil! It is your own daughter that is calling you!" After some time, the voice of a concealed man answered: "Is it yourself, Brigit O'Neil?" Aelfric could not understand the rest, because they were speaking the language of the Celts. Soon, villagers came out of the houses. They gathered about Brigit and her foreign husband, talking excitedly. Watching from the hillside, Aelfric's men debated whether or not to attack the village. They feared that their leader might be in danger from these Culdees. At this time, many heathens were distrustful of Christians.

Brigit, soon learned that her father had been dead for some time. A year after her own capture, Kieran had been killed by another ship load of vikings. During that year, Kieran had been unaware of his daughter's fate. The old man believed that she had been taken away by the *Tuatha de Danann* to their secret realm of *Tir na Nog*. People said that this was probably the case. It was well known that Brigit had been friendly with the fairies which inhabited those parts.

Brigit explained all this to Aelfric as the villagers related it in their Celtic language. That night, the inhabitants allowed Aelfric to sleep in Kieran's old house. However, they said that his men must sleep in tents by the seashore. Far from being cowards, these Culdees were well armed and knew how to handle their swords and axes. It is doubtful that Aelfric and his six men could have killed them.

The next morning, Aelfric awoke to find his wife sitting by the window and looking out over the village. She smiled at him and said, "I am glad to have returned here, even if no one in my family is still alive." Brigit went on, "But now, I can leave this island, and go with you to England without any regrets."

"Of that, I am very glad indeed," Aelfric said, "But my men are expecting me to return with spoils, or news about where booty can be obtained." Brigit said: "It would be useless to attack this village, for as you can see, the people have no gold." "That is quite evident, wife," Aelfric said, "But it was because of you that I told the men to spare them in exchange for loot." Brigit laughed, "Then come with me into the hills today, and you will not be disappointed."

The Island of Red-Eared Cattle

It had been a cold winter in Iceland, and Bjarni had lain at home stricken with an illness all winter. When spring came, he said to Sigrid, "It seems that Iceland



does not agree with me after all." Bjarni went on, "So I have it in mind to outfit a ship and to sail off after Aelfric." Sigrid said that she thought a sea voyage might cure Bjarni's illness, "For I think that restlessness is the cause."

Nevertheless, Sigrid had no desire to go abroad with Bjarni. "For my part, I will remain here in Thorbjarnardale and maintain the farm. As well, I wish to be here when my sister's child is born." For in that winter, Thorgerð had married the son of Olaf the Lawspeaker. This man's name was Thorstein Olafsson, and he was a most promising man.

That same year, when spring had come, Bjarni purchased a ship at Reykjavik and sailed it round to Leifsholm. There he provisioned it for a voyage, and set out about midsummer's day.

Bjarni sailed southward for three days with a good wind. Then, the winds stopped and they rowed for two more days. On the fifth day, when sunset was near, they could see a barren forbidding land off the port bow. It had very high cliffs, and as they rowed nearer, they could hear the sea pounding against a rocky shore. Still, no wind blew up, so Bjarni's men rigged a sea anchor and hove to off that shore. It was clear that they were somewhat off course. The vikings were tired from two days of rowing.

The next morning, when Bjarni awoke, the sound of the surf was very strong. The ship had drifted inshore during the night, and a fresh wind was blowing from the West. Bjarni shouted loudly to awaken the crew, and told them to row very strongly. There was a good chance that the ship would be wrecked on a lee shore, he said, unless they could pull away. To add to their discomfort, the men could see the inhabitants of the land standing upon the high cliffs. It seemed to them that the foreigners were carrying spears.

Then the men on the cliff top began to run down to a little creek mouth that Bjarni had not noticed. They could see many small leather boats being rowed out of the inlet. The boats were of the type which the Celts call *curragh*.

Bjarni was certain that they would soon be attacked, so he told his men to row as strongly as possible for the open sea. "For I have undertaken this voyage to find Aelfric, and not for a viking expedition." Bjarni went on, "And I have no wish to dine in Valhalla tonight!" People in those parts had no love for vikings.

The wind and tide were against Bjarni, and when he had his men raise the sail, the element of air only carried him closer to the shoreline and the foes who were putting out to sea. Finally, Bjarni could see that there was no way of avoiding a

fight any longer. He raised his sword, Shield-Cleaver and shook it at the enemy. "Drop the sail," he ordered his men, "And arm yourselves. As we are outnumbered, the more glory will be ours when we reach Odin's lofty hall!" The crew banged sword against shield and set up a great cry. Bjarni then composed this stanza:

One-eyed Odin's word was right.
The rune-wife told no lie in this.
Soon, ravens will pick my bones.

The men in the small boats paddled swiftly and soon surrounded the viking ship. Their crews clapped sword against shield and began to shout. Bjarni was certain that they had not rowed out to talk. Then a man in the leading curragh stood up and addressed the Northmen.

"Two times in as many years have you ravagers assailed our coasts. On those occasions, you found us ill prepared. Wolf and raven you left rejoicing, sailing away to the sound of women's wails. But you will find no craven here today. Choose now quickly; war or peace. And if the former, then Hel take you! Speak swiftly!"

At this, a roar of rage went up from the viking ship. "Row closer, gallows-fodder!" Bjarni said, "Odin's ash is empty, and the grim god waits." He hurled this insult at the enemy. "Tonight, fish will feast on your flesh, while we toast Odin!" The Celts began to wail their horrible war cries, rowing closer and launching their javelins. The shield-wall stood firm. None could board the viking ship. Many Celts went wailing to a watery grave. The sea creatures dined well that day.

All day the Celts rowed to and fro about Bjarni's ship. Some of their darts found unlucky marks. Still, the Celts could not breach the sturdy shield-wall of the vikings. Then an easterly wind sprang up, and great flashes of lightning arced across the top of the world. Bjarni ordered the sail hoisted, and soon it filled with a strong wind.

Given free rein, the sea mare leaped ahead, furrowing wave, foam flying. From the stern, Bjarni flourished Shield-Cleaver aloft. He may have been berserk by then. The Celts turned tail, as they always do.

Then they sailed due West with a good wind. For two days, they saw no land. On the third day, they saw a low, green, fertile land. Its hills were dotted with sheep, and they could see white cows roaming the meadows. Bjarni steered close in along

the coast. After a while, they found a harbour and went ashore. That night, they feasted on some of the white, red-eared cattle. No inhabitants hindered them.

The next morning the weather was fine. Bjarni's men had spent the night in tents pitched upon the fields by the strand. Bjarni got out of his tent and walked along the headland and stood looking out to sea. Then he saw a ship come sailing toward the land, and it looked to him as though he ought to recognize it. When the ship got closer, Bjarni saw that it was his own ship, and he saw Aelfric standing at the steering board steering it. A woman dressed in grey and purple was standing beside him.

Then, Aelfric dropped the sail and guided the ship into the cove. Bjarni and his men rushed out to meet the sailors, and Aelfric helped Brigit down from the ship and into the shallow water. Bjarni looked at the foreign woman for some time. Then he said, "It seems to me that you have had adventures after all." "That is very true," Aelfric said. "Not the least of which is that I have met a wife." He told Bjarni about the voyage while the crews unloaded equipment from the ship. Then, the three of them went walking out into the fields and stopped to rest at a small mound or hill whence they could look down over the harbour. Then Bjarni told Aelfric about his encounter with the Irish men.

Brigit said: "My people have learned to be cautious when they see a strange ship." Bjarni said, "That is certain, but nevertheless, I had no intention of attacking those Celts." They sat talking about affairs in Ireland and the Orkneys for some time. Then Bjarni said to Aelfric, "It appears that you have on some new rings, and this new wife of yours is wearing fine jewelry."

Aelfric said, "Brigit, has brought me a great deal of treasure, and it would please me very much if you would accept a few gifts." Aelfric went on, "For it seems to me that none of my good fortune would have been possible without you and your ship."

That same evening, after they had eaten more of the red-eared cattle, and drunk a little mead, Aelfric sent some men to the ship, and they came back laden with heavy sacks. Aelfric reached into the bags and pulled out many rings and bracelets, along with fine swords and war gear that looked to be very old. He gave these presents to Bjarni and his men.

As the twilight was coming on, and the crews were sitting on the shore drinking and singing songs, a sound came to their ears which seemed to be the baying of huge dogs. A rumbling that sounded like horses' hooves followed the baying, and then they heard the sound of a musical instrument being played. The instrument

was like a harp, but very loud, and it played continuously for some time, all the notes running together. Then, Bjarni looked around him and saw that all of his men had fallen asleep. Only Bjarni, Aelfric, and Brigit were still awake. All this time, the vikings had seen no hounds, nor riders, nor musicians.

Then, a sound like footsteps was heard, and a large man came toward them over the hills. Bjarni looked at his companions. Aelfric, was watching the stranger, but Brigit was busy drawing off a huge cooking bowl of ale from one of the vats, and singing an old verse to herself:

"My kitchen, the kitchen of the White Lord. A kitchen where there is butter." This verse had been written by a famous woman from Ireland. Brigit went on, *"That I might have a great lake of ale to give to my lord."* All this time, the stranger kept approaching, and Bjarni could see that he was carrying a harp. The man came down to the camp and looked at the sleeping sailors. He turned to the three visitors and said in a loud voice, "What will you give in exchange for the cattle you have eaten?"

Then, Brigit gave the stranger the basin of ale. The man was so large that the cooking pot seemed as small as a drinking cup in his hand. The stranger finished the ale without pausing, and handed the bowl back to Brigit. "This ale is exceedingly good," the stranger said. "It appears that you have received it from my kinsmen in Ireland."

Then Aelfric addressed the stranger. "That seems likely, for by the sound of your music, you are of the *Tuatha de Danann*," Aelfric said, "For your music seems to me like the music of the *Sidhe*." "That is certain," the other replied, "For I am Oisín, son of Finn, son of Cumhal, poet of the *Tuatha de Danann*."

The stranger sat down upon a rock and began to tune his harp. At the sound of the harp strings, Bjarni felt himself starting to fall asleep. Then the stranger began to sing a song, and soon Bjarni was snoring. Few people could remain awake listening to the continuous music of the *Sidhe*.

Aelfric said: "How is it that you are here in this time, since it is long ago that you were alive?" The stranger said, "That is the very question that Patrick the Adze-Head asked Aillenn of the Many Shapes, daughter to Bodb Dearg, son of the Dagda." Oisín recited the woman's lineage. Then he said, "And here is the answer she gave: I am not an ever-living woman of the *Sidhe*, but I am of the *Tuatha de Danann*, having my own body about me. Nevertheless, everyone that drank at Giobniu's Feast," he said, "no sickness or wasting comes upon them."

Brigit said that she was surprised to hear that Oisín had spoken with Patrick. This Patrick was a famous Christian man from Ireland, but he had lived quite some time ago. The poet replied that he had had many conversations with that famous man. "And Patrick wrote down much of what we discussed in a book of his," Oisín went on.

Then, the poet asked Aelfric what they proposed to do next. Aelfric and Brigit gazed at one another for some time without speaking. Then Aelfric replied. "My friend Bjarni has lent me this ship I am sailing, and has now come to see whether I needed his help, so I suppose I must return to Iceland with him."

He went on, "But for my part, I would prefer to learn the fate of my father in England, and I think that my wife wishes to go there as well." Oisín looked at Aelfric and Brigit for some time. He put down his harp and drank another basin of ale. Then he composed this stanza:

Bjarni the viking wishes to farm,
While the landlord's son wants to wander the world.
Neither knows that Brigit has bested him.

The poet finished drinking and stood up. Aelfric and Brigit stood with him, looking out over the ocean. Then Oisín said: "I think that you had better come with me to the king's court. After that, perhaps you should go on to England." Brigit said that this would please them well, "But what of Bjarni and the two ships' crews?"

The next day, when dawn broke, there was a thick mist over the sea. Bjarni was standing at the stern of his ship, holding the steering board. He could see Aelfric's ship plowing through the waves along side. Suddenly, the mist parted and the shore of Iceland lay ahead. Bjarni could see the buildings of Leifsholm off the starboard bow. The vikings dropped the sails, and rowed the ships into the harbour. Bjarni could see Sigrid standing on the shore. Soon the ships were berthed, and Sigrid was welcoming them.

When the crews had hauled their things up onto the land, Sigrid looked up and down. Aelfric was evidently not there. Moreover, it seemed to her that all of the men were wearing expensive ornaments and fine clothing. Bjarni stood there laughing at Sigrid's expression. Then, he reached into his pouch and drew out several well-made pieces of jewelry, and gave them to his wife. "These rings and torques come from Ireland," Bjarni said. "They are gifts to you from our friend Aelfric."

Sigrid said that the jewelry looked very pretty, "But I wonder why it is that Aelfric has not sailed back with you?" Bjarni said, "I think it may be some time before Aelfric returns to Iceland." He went on, "Nevertheless, I suspect we will be seeing again him one day."

Bjarni told Sigrid the story of Aelfric and Brigit. That night, the household dined in Bjarni's hall. Sigrid seemed very pleased to have her husband home again. The feasting and story-telling went on for several days. Sigrid composed this stanza:

The Norse delve the deep for treasure.
Their swift sea-mares furrow the waves.
Here at home, I hold the best hoard.

Explicit Liber

A note on the text, November 2003.

Some years back, a man at work asked why I wasted so much time reading mediaeval sagas and chronicles. Rather than trying to justify the pursuit, I decided to write him a little story, combining Norse, Irish, and Anglo Saxon elements. This is the result, and I hope it offends none of those people. For some genuine Icelandic sagas, including the *Heimskringla*, the *Laxdaela Saga*, and more, visit www.iceland.is. This story works better if read aloud.

This story was written during the 1980s, and on re-reading it, I feel some notes are in order. First, Snorri Sturluson and the other Saga writers were very fond of alliteration. Bjarni carries this penchant to the extreme in his first stanza : "I walk this way to wed a red-haired maid..." The sagas are also full of oblique references and allusions. Bjarni exemplifies this tendency when he speaks of his ship as a sea stallion and of plowing literal as opposed to literary furrows as a farmer. A genuine example may be found in the prayer, "may he hold his hawk's perch over me."

The ash tree under which Bjarni stands is a figure of the world tree, Yggdrassils Ask, which joins the underworld with middle-earth and the abode of the gods. Odin was tied to an ash when he received the mystic vision of the runes. While the Allthing would have awarded a wife half the goods of the marriage upon divorce, the story teller is admittedly vague about the rules of procedure at the Law Rock.

Some of the people in this tale are real. They include Olaf the Lawspeaker, Thorbjorn Thor's Priest, Harald Fairhair, Eirik the Red, Leif the Lucky, and Olaf Tryggvasson. The passage in which Olaf kills Thorbjorn Thor's Priest attempts to

capture the matter of factness of the sagas. As luck would have it, Olaf missed his chance, so ethics aside, it's his turn to be killed. A similar incident occurs in *King Harald's Saga*. *Sigrids Saga* sometimes draws upon secondary sources like *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*, and *The Cult of Odin*, and especially from "The Norse Discovery of America" section in E.V. Gordon's classic text book, *An Introduction to Old Norse*, a colleague of J.R.R. Tolkien.

While the episode of Brigit's capture is indebted to William Morris' *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, the image of Brigit running about on the beach in purple, green, and grey, was inspired by one of singer Judy Collins' album jackets, and by a Steeleye Span lyric about a fairy: "His coat was neither green nor grey". However, the Unn in this story bears little resemblance to Unn the Deep Minded.

The mediaeval love of word play is evident in this saga's mention of the sword given by Olaf to Bjarni. "That same sword belonged to Olaf Tryggvasson's father." It would have been easier, but not as much fun, simply to say it was King Trygvy's sword. A similar instance can be found in the passage about Brigit's being named after 'a famous Christian woman'. Of course, it was St. Brigit, the Mary of the Gael. When we get to the Orkneys and the west of Ireland, the saga stops being so Norse, and starts to get quite Irish both in theme and in diction.

The episode with the Big Men and the music of the Side is adapted from a story about Saint Patrick. White animals with red ears would have been considered fairy beasts. Why are the Tuatha de Danaan big in the some stories, but little in others? Following the suggestion of William Irwin Thompson, I'd say it was dimensional engineering - the same mastery over space and time that meant mere weeks passed in fairyland took years or centuries in middle-earth. And are they really the fairies, the Side? (It's pronounced 'shee' as in 'banshee').

The statement of Eileen of the Many Shapes: "I am not an ever-living woman of the Side, but I am of the Tuatha de Danaan, having my own body about me", is recounted in Lady Gregory's *Book of Saints and Wonders*. For more, see the *Imram Brain* which means 'the rowing-about of Bran', and *The Voyage of Brendan*. The prayers in this saga are authentic mediaeval ones, and include St. Brigit's prayer about having a lake of ale. She enjoyed being hospitable: "My kitchen, the kitchen of the White Lord, a kitchen where there is butter."

cbs.